

# Libertinism, Skepticism, and Free Thought

by courtesy of Prof. R.F.W. Kroll

The importance of French thought is very great. (You may remember that many court members spent their exile in France.) In his edition of French libertine writings, Antoine Adam chronologically sketches three traditions of libertinism (see Les libertines de la XVIIe siècle):

(a) *Ethical Libertinism* (my term): an early type of libertinism summed up in the life and thought of Théophile de Viau. After de Viau was arrested in 1623, the movement faded. Rochester is a late inheritor of this strain. de Viau held that

man, not above nature, but radically planted within matter, follows the same laws as the animals, dominated by his passions, inconstant and unpre-dictable, despite attempting to follow the prompting of a free and certain human will. (Adam 9, my translation)

(b) *Le Libertinage Érudit* (“erudite libertinism”): adopted by the middle classes, college professors, and clergymen who encouraged among themselves a spirit of free inquiry and left no orthodoxy unexamined. They have been falsely portrayed, according to Richard Popkin in his History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza, as “subtle, clever, sophisticated men engaged in a sort of conspiracy to undermine confidence in orthodoxy and traditional intellectual authority” (Popkin 87-88). Their position *vis à vis* religion took either the view that (i) we cannot really know anything for certain, so we must throw ourselves upon God in blind faith (fideism); or that (ii) we cannot know anything for certain, but must admit the probabilities of the Christian faith and the rules which appear to govern the conduct of ordinary life.

(c) *The Madame Deshoulières Circle*: like the form of libertinism in (b), this flourished in the mid- and late-seventeenth century. Its members were influenced by the philosophy of Epicurus, whom they did not treat as an ethical libertine. According to Adam, they were “obsessed by the image of death”; consequently, they “felt beauty deeply. They had a sort of adoration of it. It is fragile, ephemeral, but it allows for optimism. Man alone is unhappy . . . it is society which is the cause of our misfortunes [and] we can see that evil is in the heart of man . . . [T]he libertines of the second half of the century thought . . . that the intellect, or . . . the conscience, is the true cause of our misery” (Adam 23, my translation). This all resulted in quietism, the abdication of desire and thought in an almost religious attempt to rest in the Eternal Being and the Infinite Good.